

“Look Up in Hope”  
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 2, 2018  
Luke 21:25-36

Those of you who, like me, grew up in the 1950's and 60's, did our growing up under the shadow of the “mushroom cloud,” that ominous symbol of the nuclear age that represented the fears, especially in those days, of yet a third world war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This war would be fought not by soldiers on a battlefield, but by a massive exchange of nuclear weapons, primarily between the Soviet Union and the United States. As children in school one of the ways they managed that fear was what we now know was the absurd practice of air raid drills, where we would all file out of our classrooms into the hallway, sit down with our backs to the wall, duck our heads between our knees and cover our heads with our hands – as if in the event of that which we feared, this would in any way protect us. I'm not sure if it helped to manage the fear or just make it worse – but I remember I was always glad when it was over.

In those years, especially, this passage from Luke's gospel, and similar ones in the other gospels and in the Old Testament, this apocalyptic imagery, seemed to be describing the scenario of a nuclear holocaust, as in other times in history they have been interpreted in the light of other catastrophic events, feared or realized. The image of falling towers may well symbolize it for this generation.

We know there was an ancient idea about the cosmos, an idea that had a profound effect on the whole of Western thought and history – that the heavens were eternal and unchangeable. Over time this idea emerged as part of the Christian church's official teaching. One of the reasons that the church opposed Galileo, who proposed that the heavens were in fact changeable, was that his new cosmology challenged all that. Believers who suffered the changes and the chances of human existence had long taken comfort in the solid reliability of their final destination, in the eternal heavens – and the church didn't want to disrupt that conviction.

Of course modern astronomy has discovered that the heavens are far more dynamic than Galileo ever imagined: exploding stars, novas and supernovas, meteoric collisions, galaxies running away from each other. In fact, nothing that the Bible describes is more astounding or wondrous than what has been observed as the facts of the physical universe. They are enough

to create as much awe at the power of the creator as any passage in scripture. If these descriptions and these moments in scripture seem to be scientifically untenable in our day, they do continue to illumine our inner or internal “space” – the deep space of human hope and fear. The impact of Jesus’ words about the coming of these things would be frightening to human beings who “will faint from fear and foreboding.” But Jesus encourages another response, and in doing so he feeds human hope – because he reminds us that all the structures of reality, even heaven, are subservient to the power of God. There are openings for transformation that are beyond our reckoning. Everything is not nailed down and locked tight. A solid, unchanging world allows for no windows through which hope can shine. And so we aren’t to “duck and cover” when these things begin to appear, he says, but to “look up,” because our “redemption is drawing near.”

It is important to see and understand where Luke the gospel writer places this scene where Jesus speaks of these things. It is just before Jesus is betrayed and taken into custody by the authorities – so for Jesus himself there is a sense of time shortening. There have been moments of vicious and aggressive questioning, of angrily dismissing his authority to say and do the things he said and did. Surely, as human, Jesus would find his own thoughts and feelings clouded. Images of threat and fear would come into his mind – images of the troubling world around him but also his inner turmoil. As we continue to walk with him these images expand into images of cosmic threat – sun, moon, stars, oceans, the earth itself, all heaving in turmoil. Confrontation is near.

This is how we begin the season of Advent, which by human reckoning and society’s calculations has more to do with nostalgia (which someone has described as “the past as we wished it to be”) than with hope that confronts fear and dread. We ought to see Jesus’ inner wrestling as a pattern of our own. We know how our personal fears can turn to a kind of cosmic dread. Fear doesn’t make room for the possibility of redemption. It can paralyze us, and cause us to live in a locked-down condition. But hope causes us to look up – as Jesus looks up and sees a fig tree. He points to the leaves bursting forth, summertime coming in the midst of the darkest days. For everything that would limit and confine there is the possibility of transformation. And as we continue to walk with him he counsels us to be alert to the hope within us, to guard against hearts weighed down with the worries of life – to pray – and to wait with expectant hearts in such a way that leaves the door to the future ajar.

Roger Gench shares something of the kind of waiting and expecting that Advent invites in us, when he tells of the legend that is behind the strange phenomenon of the Texas A&M student body at every home football game of that team. They remain standing for the entire game. The story goes that in a far distant critical contest, a rash of injuries devastated the Aggies team,

leaving only ten people on the field – one team member short. So as to keep the Aggies from a decisive defeat, one valiant member of the student body leaped from the stands and dashed onto the field, and ran for a touchdown – contributing to a stunning victory that day. Ever since, the legend goes, the entire Texas A&M student body remains standing during the entire course of every game – waiting and vigilant – in readiness to dash from the stands and leap into action on the field.

This is the kind of waiting and watching that Luke has in mind, Gench suggests, mobilizing us to join at those points where God’s future is struggling to be realized now – and to see the ways we may be faithful to the way God has set before us. You can’t do that when you duck and cover – only when you look up, when you’re “on guard,” when you’re waiting in readiness.

This is the posture of Advent. It’s how we begin our journey toward Christmas – by confronting the dread, the fears and the foreboding within us and in our world – not hope in the promise of human progress, but in the promises of God. For it is as the church father Tertullian put it – “The kingdom of God . . . is beginning to be at hand . . . already heavenly things are taking the place of earthly, and great things of small, and eternal things of things that fade away. What room is there here for anxiety and solicitude?” Or, as W.H. Auden has put it, we are journeying toward the impossible, when “the infinite becomes a finite fact. Nothing can save us (he continues) that is possible.” You have to look up to see it. You have to be alert to the signs, to feel the transformation beginning to take hold.

As we share in the sacrament this morning, let that hope feed you as bread that does not perish, and as healing cup that would make us whole again. Let it nourish you in spirit in these days of preparation, that our fears would take wing, and we would live by hope in the One who even now is struggling to be born in us.